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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000647

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA  
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P FOR DRUSSELL, RRANGASWAMY  
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NSC FOR SHAPIRO, MCDERMOTT  
DOD/OSD FOR FLOURNOY/KAHL/DALTON  
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OVP FOR HMUSTAFA

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [UNSC](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [LE](#) [IS](#) [SY](#) [IR](#)  
SUBJECT: LEBANON: SCENESETTER FOR S/E GEORGE MITCHELL'S  
JUNE 12 VISIT

REF: A. BEIRUT 634  
[1](#)B. BEIRUT 627  
[1](#)C. BEIRUT 597  
[1](#)D. BEIRUT 596  
[1](#)E. BEIRUT 593  
[1](#)F. BEIRUT 570  
[1](#)G. ANKARA 633

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Embassy Beirut welcomes your visit, which comes just five days after Lebanon's June 7 parliamentary elections in which the pro-western March 14 coalition won the majority by an unexpected margin. Lebanese officials have eagerly anticipated your trip to Beirut since your appointment was announced on January 21. During your visit, you will meet with President Michel Sleiman, Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, March 14 majority leader Saad Hariri, and opposition-aligned Foreign Minister Fawzi Salloukh.

[1](#)2. (C) Officials and influential Lebanese opinion makers single out the Arab-Israeli conflict as the biggest obstacle to solving other regional issues, including disarming Hizballah and halting the perceived expansion of Iranian influence. The Lebanese argue that they are committed to the Palestinian "right of return" and are opposed to any resolution that would force the permanent resettlement ("tawteen") of Lebanon's 400,000 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, fearing that it would upset Lebanon's delicate confessional balance. Lebanese interlocutors will likely praise the constructive role of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), most recently evidenced during the 2008/2009 Gaza conflict. Israel, however, is still officially the GOL's enemy, with officials like PM Siniora saying Lebanon will be the last in the region to sign a peace agreement with Israel, especially while Israel occupies northern Ghajar village and Shebaa Farms. President Sleiman supports full implementation of 1701 and has hinted at the possibility of indirect talks with Israel if certain conditions are met, though probably "not now." Lebanese-Syrian relations are in their nascent stages; first ever diplomatic ties were established in October 2008.

Little progress has been made in the implementation of relevant UNSCRs which call for the demarcation of the Lebanon-Syria border and calls for an end to weapons smuggling. End summary.

MARCH 14 WINS  
PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS  
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¶3. (C) The March 14 coalition won an unexpected 71 out of 128 parliamentary seats in the June 7 elections (Ref A). Prior to the elections, most political observers had forecast a close race with a difference of no more than two to four seats between the majority and the opposition. Although the results handed a clear victory to the pro-western/anti-Hizballah coalition, forming a government will be the next hurdle. Cabinet formation cannot begin until a new Speaker of Parliament and Prime Minister are selected, per constitutional procedures, but negotiations are likely to begin soon. Opposition parties, including Hizballah and its ally, Christian leader Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement, will likely insist on retaining a "blocking third" in the cabinet. The opposition gained a blocking third during negotiations for the May 2008 Doha Agreement that ended an extended period of political stalemate and violence. They may push hard to retain it.

¶4. (C) March 14 majority leader Saad Hariri wants to become Prime Minister, and likely will. His coalition had a challenging time during the campaign period keeping the March 14 infighting and disagreements out of public view. Although

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Hariri has a cadre of advisors for political matters, he does not have a team of strong advisors for policy matters such as foreign affairs. Hariri maintains an anti-Syrian position and often requests enhanced U.S. military assistance for the Lebanese Armed Forces to be used as a deterrent to Syria. He has rarely commented on the Arab-Israeli conflict, other than to say that the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, proposed by then-Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah, should be used as a basis to achieve regional peace. He also supports full implementation of UNSCR 1701 and the UN Special Tribunal for Lebanon (charged with investigating the 2005 assassination of his father, former PM Rafiq Hariri).

¶5. (C) It is well known that Hariri inherited his position as the Sunni leader in Lebanon with the backing of Saudi Arabia. He is known to have close relations with Saudi royalty, who could maintain a significant influence on Hariri in the next government, especially regarding regional issues.

LEBANESE FOR  
ARAB-ISRAELI PEACE...  
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¶6. (C) The GOL supports the Arab Peace Initiative and has a vested interest in a peaceful outcome. Other Lebanese interlocutors, including President Sleiman, current PM Fouad Siniora, and Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri, raise the need to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in nearly every meeting. During Vice President Biden's May 22 visit to Beirut, the GOL's message was that the conflict must be resolved immediately (Refs C-E). Vice President Biden reaffirmed U.S. commitment to achieving Middle East peace, but called on Lebanese and Arab interlocutors to play a constructive role.

¶7. (C) Your appointment as Special Envoy was viewed here as a positive signal that the Obama administration was focused on the issue. Lebanese officials argue that Iran and its allies, especially Hizballah and Hamas, have manipulated the conflict for its own gain by claiming itself the "protector" of the Palestinian people.

¶8. (C) President Obama's June 4 speech in Cairo was perceived

as a "good first step" (Ref B). Many Lebanese were disappointed that the speech did not outline specific actions or policy to achieve peace. However, the clear articulation of the U.S. position on Israeli settlements and the call for Arab responsibility resonated well in Lebanon. The specific reference made to Lebanon's Maronite population in the speech did not play particularly well here. (Several interlocutors complained it compared the Maronites to Coptic Christians in Egypt, a persecuted group. By contrast, Maronites are a part of Lebanon's social fabric, they said to us.)

...BUT AGAINST "TAWTEEN"

¶9. (C) The GOL remains opposed to the permanent resettlement ("tawteen") of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. Lebanon has twelve Palestinian refugee camps with a population, officially, of 400,000 Palestinians. It would be politically unpalatable for the GOL to support such a position because of sensitivities over the need for Lebanon preserve its precariously constructed confessionally-balanced political system. Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are not bestowed the rights of Lebanese citizenship, including access to work and education, as in Syria or Jordan.

PRAISE FOR UNIFIL, BUT  
ISRAEL IS STILL THE "ENEMY"

¶10. (C) The presence of the UN Interim Force for Lebanon (UNIFIL) has provided an indirect means of communication between the LAF and the Israeli Defense Forces along the Blue Line. The GOL has praised the positive role UNIFIL plays in

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tripartite working meetings, especially during the 2008/2009 Gaza conflict. Political leaders condemned the rocket attacks launched from Lebanon into Israel during that conflict. Sleiman said "I will not allow southern Lebanon to become a rocket launching pad."

¶11. (C) President Sleiman supports full implementation of UNSCR 1701 and has said he would insist on including a reference to it in the next government's policy statement (Ref F). However, Israel is officially considered by Lebanon to be "the enemy." Although 1701 outlines requirements for a Lebanese-Israeli ceasefire, pending a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace, GOL interlocutors argue that continued Israeli occupation of northern Ghajar village and Shebaa Farms and regular Israeli overflights of Lebanon impinge on Lebanese sovereignty and territory. In a more positive development, Israel handed over cluster bomb strike data from the 2006 war to UNIFIL and the Lebanese authorities earlier this year.

¶12. (C) In an interview aired June 10 on CNN, Saad Hariri reaffirmed the GOL position that Lebanon would be the last country in the region to sign a peace deal with Israel. President Sleiman and PM Siniora have also said the same in previous meetings, although Sleiman in recent months has switched from "never" to "not now" when asked about the possibility of a Lebanese-Israeli track. In meetings with Turkish officials earlier this year (ref G), when asked if he would support indirect talks with Israel, Sleiman spelled out three conditions: that the Israeli government would need to respect the 1949 armistice agreement, have no expectation of permanent Palestinian resettlement in Lebanon, and agree to withdraw from Shebaa Farms.

LEBANESE-SYRIAN RELATIONS

¶13. (C) After almost 30 years of Syrian presence in Lebanon, the Syrian military withdrew in 2005 following Rafiq Hariri's assassination. Lebanon and Syria formally established diplomatic relations in October 2008. The two sides exchanged

ambassadors in the spring of 2009. Aside from these modest steps at normalized relations, Lebanon and Syria have yet to tackle the myriad bilateral agreements, covering a wide range of defense, economic, and social issues, signed under the auspices of the Syrian-Lebanese Higher Council during Syrian occupation. The GOL, publicly and privately, calls on its "sisterly neighbor" to respect Lebanon's sovereignty and independence, while acknowledging the desire to maintain good relations.

¶14. (C) On border issues, the GOL and the SARG have engaged in modest cooperation to add more patrols to certain sections of the border. However, the borders remain porous. Signs of implementation of relevant UNSCRs which call for the delineation of the Lebanon-Syria border, an end to weapons smuggling, and the disarmament of armed groups in Lebanon, are lacking. The SARG denies, and the GOL claims not to have evidence, of weapons smuggling from Syria into Lebanon. Other major issues the GOL has not tackled yet with Syria include missing Lebanese detained in Syria and military camps affiliated with Sunni extremists along the border.

SISON